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Mexico Drug Arrests: 'Tip of Iceberg'

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MEXICO CITY, April 27 — While encouraged by recent progress in rooting out drug-related corruption here, Mexican and United States officials are concerned over indications that it may reach to higher levels of the Mexican Government than first thought.

Investigations, which began after a United States narcotics agent and his pilot were kidnapped and killed in February, have succeeded in capturing two men reputed to be major heads of the Mexican drug trade and several dozen accomplices, including past and present members of Mexican police forces. One police commander is charged with having taken a large bribe to permit the flight of one of the country's leading drug dealers.

United States officials here and in Washington, who only recently were harshly critical of their Mexican counterparts for what they viewed as a "lack of vigor" in pursuing drug traffickers, have been lavish in their praise of the recent Mexican actions.

But the United States Ambassador here, John Gavin, told visiting businessmen from Dallas recently that it was too early to "fall into the trap of self-congratulations" because "what has been turned up is just the tip of the iceberg."

A Pointed Omission

While reaffirming his praise for what he called "the seriousness of President de la Madrid's commitment to fight drug trafficking," the Ambassador pointedly failed to repeat a statement he had often made before: that he had full confidence in the honesty and integrity of President Miguel de la Madrid's Cabinet. Aides to Mr. Gavin said the omission was not accidental.

Officials of the embassy here would not discuss what information led Mr. Gavin to modify his previous statement. But people close to the investigation have hinted in recent days that information gathered over the last month has raised concern that at least one Cabinet member and the son of a Cabinet member may have links to drug traffickers or have been compromised by them.

There are increasing indications as well, these sources say, that some state governors, state prosecutors and local politicians may have had a role in al-

lowing Mexico's drug trade to reach its current levels. No public charges have been made against anyone in such a prominent position.

Some of the information is believed to have come from Rafael Caro Quintero and Ernesto Fonseca Carillo, the two men captured and charged in connection with the killing of Enrique Camarena Salazar, an agent of the United States Drug Enforcement Agency, and Alfredo Zavala Avelar, a Mexican pilot who sometimes flew surveillance missions for him.

A third person, Miguel Félix Gallardo, is still being sought. He is reputed to be a key figure in Mexico's cocaine operations, and is also believed by Mexican and United States investigators to have had a role in the killing of the agent and the pilot.

Links With Police Reported

Mexican officials have said the two men in custody, who have also been charged with a variety of drug-related offenses, have given extensive information on ties between drug traffickers and police forces in the country. While some of this has been made public in the Mexican courts, mention of political figures has been viewed by the Mexican public as suspiciously lacking.

The problem for the de la Madrid Government, according to officials knowledgeable about the thinking of its upper echelons, is to root out corrupt elements without causing a major disruption of the country's political system. This concern has been sharpened by the approach of elections in July for Congress, seven governors and dozens of municipal officials.

The analogy often heard in Mexican political circles is that of trying to pull bricks from a wall without causing the whole thing to collapse. "Except this isn't just a few bricks," a Mexican journalist said. "It's a whole chunk."

The Government has taken actions in recent days that have not been publicly linked to the drug trade, but appear to be linked to revelations of corruption.

Orders Police Reorganized

On Wednesday President de la Madrid announced a major reorganization of the police forces, which would strengthen federal control and remove police powers from several smaller forces run by Government ministries

and industries. The announcement described the reorganization as a "clarification of the police functions that, by constitutional mandate, remain reserved only for the preventive and judicial corps."

In a more drastic action, the Governor of the State of Morelos, Lauro Ortega, dismissed the state's entire judicial system, including the state attorney general, police and administrative personnel, in what he said was an effort to stamp out growing signs of corruption. He said a new force would be recruited from among law students.

Although there has been no public announcement, investigators said nearly 100 agents of the Federal Security Directorate, a political police force and counterintelligence unit run by the powerful Interior Ministry, have also resigned in recent weeks. Some parts of the directorate have been cited by United States investigators as a major problem in fighting the drug traffic.

Ambassador Gavin said those who were waiting for "the last shoe to fall" would have to wait for some time. "This," he said, "is a centipede."